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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001639

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: FIRST BATTLE OF PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN:
WITHIN THE SLFP?

REF: A. COLOMBO 1558

1B. COLOMBO 1605

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

11. (C) Summary: Incumbent President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's angry public reaction to Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) presidential candidate and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse's electoral pacts with the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) has ignited an ugly firestorm within the SLFP before the campaign has even officially begun. The nasty public spat has set off renewed speculation that Kumaratunga may try to knock her own candidate off balance by dissolving Parliament ahead of presidential elections. While the tiff is ostensibly focused on approaches to the peace process, the real battle may be about whether the President is prepared to relinquish her own and her family's grip on the party. End summary.

12. (U) After Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) presidential candidate and current Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse signed an electoral pact with the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) on September 8 that promised to reverse key parts of incumbent President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's policy on the peace process, local newspapers on September 10 prominently featured Kumaratunga's very angry--and very public--response to the PM's free-lancing. Just before leaving for the UN General Assembly, Kumaratunga told local journalists that clauses in the Rajapakse/JVP agreement (Ref A)--especially those pledging to scrap the Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure (P-TOMS) and "preserve the unitary nature of the Sri Lankan State"--violated SLFP policies and had not been cleared by the party's Central Committee. Kumaratunga hinted strongly that the party manifesto--which has not yet been finalized and which she still controls as party head--could likely end up directly contravening many elements in the pact. Finally, she complained bitterly that Rajapakse had failed to inform her properly of his plans to ally with her erstwhile coalition partner. (Comment: She might not have been properly informed, but she could hardly have been surprised. As noted Ref A, the JVP had been broadcasting its agreement with Rajapakse more than a week before the actual signing.) Contents of a letter from Kumaratunga to Rajapakse reprimanding him for the JVP pact and warning him against signing a similar agreement with the "extremist" Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) were leaked to the press--and duly headlined--the following day. Apparently not taking the warning to heart, on September 13 Rajapakse signed an agreement with the JHU that featured similar commitments to uphold the "unitary" nature of Sri Lanka, abandon the P-TOMS, and renegotiate the Ceasefire Agreement.

13. (U) Not to be left out, Foreign Minister and Presidential brother Anura Bandaranaike chimed in with his own belligerent comments to the press. Local newspapers on September 13 quoted the Foreign Minister (who lost out to Rajapakse in his own bid to secure the presidential nomination) as asserting that he and his older sister had "lost interest" in the election because of the PM's cavalier disregard for party policies. (Note: Bandaranaike could not, however, complain, as his sister did, that he was not properly informed of the agreement with the JVP--especially since he attended the September 8 signing ceremony. End note.) In a follow-up interview published in the local press on September 16, Bandaranaike said that the party would "closely review" the PM's agreements with the JVP and JHU. The seeming intra-party rift has fueled fresh speculation that the peeved President may try to torpedo Rajapakse's campaign by dissolving Parliament ahead of presidential elections. (Note: The date of the presidential elections remains undetermined. An announcement by the Election Commissioner is expected early next week.)

14. (C) Comment: Before the PM signed the agreements with the JVP and JHU, Kumaratunga's support for her would-be successor could best be described as tepid. Her most recent public criticisms, however, make her sound like a more vigorous opposition campaigner than the rival United National Party (UNP). Fast nearing the end of her 11-year reign as President, Kumaratunga is obviously concerned about her legacy and has no wish to see her initiatives, however unsuccessful or late in the day, to advance the peace process

repudiated by her successor. Moreover, even if she has to step aside as President after two terms, there is no term limit on control of the party, and Kumaratunga apparently has no intention of ceding that post, which has been a family fiefdom since the SLFP's inception, to a non-Bandaranaike. Most observers agree that the impending presidential race between the SLFP's Rajapakse and the UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe will be close. For now, however, the first real battle of this presidential election seems to be internal.

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